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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000665

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PI, ECA/FO
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: INDEPENDENT SHIA CLERIC SAYS HIZBALLAH'S
ARROGANCE IS GROWING

REF: BEIRUT 00627

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Despite the current violence, moderate Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammad Ali Al-Hajj (Para 17 for bio) traveled to the Embassy on May 12 to keep his previously scheduled appointment with the Charge to discuss the independent Shia movement in Lebanon. Al-Hajj criticized the timing of the Cabinet's decisions on airport security and the Hizballah telephone network (reftel). "They had been warned that there would be a very strong reaction from Hizballah and yet now they are acting surprised." However, he lamented the fact that these recent events will "increase Hizballah's arrogance 100 times more than its supposed victory against Israel in 2006." He urged the Charge to work for a solution that would quickly calm the tensions in the streets, as Hizballah may continue to have the upper hand in an armed conflict. Looking to the long-term, he also urged the Charge to carefully craft a thoughtful, committed U.S. plan to effectively and appropriately support the independent Shia, with a special emphasis on youth programs. End Summary

Hizballah Most Worried About Enemies From Within

¶2. (C) According to Al-Hajj, pressure had been building in Hizballah for months. International events and the current political vacuum have convinced both Hizballah's senior leaders and junior members that trouble was imminent. In fact, Al-Hajj thought this extreme violence is a reaction to issues far more important than the Cabinet's two recent decisions.

¶3. (C) According to Al-Hajj, "Hizballah is most afraid of the enemy within. They are using this conflict to 'clear the decks' within Lebanon in order to solely focus on a fight with Israel over the summer. Many thought that the phrase, 'It's going to be a long, hot summer in Lebanon,' was proof of this imminent external attack." (Note: Al-Hajj is referring to the opposition press's erroneous attribution of this quote to Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David Welch in April 2008. Embassy immediately refuted the story, but the opposition press had already swayed the minds of some Lebanese Shia. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Al-Hajj said Hizballah is the ultimate opportunist organization. "It will use these tactical gains to continue to push for more and more concessions. The events of this week will increase its arrogance and it will now start to push against their other internal rivals, such as the independent Shia."

Calm Needs to Be Restored

¶5. (C) When asked by the Charge, Al-Hajj said that there are two possible ways out of the crisis. The first, a kinetic counter-attack on Hizballah, will not work. "Hizballah might actually win and many innocent lives will be lost in the cross-fire." The only hope lies in the second option, which is for a peaceful solution to be negotiated. "We must restore calm immediately." He said that March 14 leaders had been publicly warned that Hizballah would not take these decisions lying down. Furthermore, he told us that March 14 leaders had for months been renting homes in the safe mountain areas of the north, implying that many knew a confrontation was coming. "And yet, now they are all pretending to be surprised."

¶6. (C) He was most concerned by the fact that the current violence was not even at the hands of the most hardened core Hizballah fighters. "If they had been in charge, this would have been over in 30 minutes. They don't care about blood or violence." Al-Hajj said that the fighters in the streets now were young, undisciplined, non-religious Shia who were

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personally loyal to Hassan Nasrallah. Although trained in Hizballah training camps, Al-Hajj insisted that they are not considered formal members of the Hizballah organization.

¶7. (C) When asked for his opinion about Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Al-Hajj said there was no use even talking to him. "He has money and support from Hizballah and is its perfect political pawn. There is no common ground to be found."

Countering Hizballah's "Darkness"

¶8. (C) Al-Hajj said that Hizballah gained strength in the 1980's because it offered Shia religious believers a political alternative to the "feudal system" that dominated Lebanon for decades. Hizballah's religious leaders tapped into their followers on a deep level. Al-Hajj said that any attempt to counter Hizballah's influence must also include religious leaders who are able to speak on the same emotional level to offer an alternate vision. "You must go to the source of the darkness if you are to bring back the light."

¶9. (C) However, he said the independent Shia movement must also be multifaceted, with expert voices from a range of background to present an informed and intelligent vision for change. This must be a strong, independent group. "You will never be able to take people out of Hizballah and put them directly into March 14. If you have a third options, you will likely severely drain the membership ranks of Hizballah and Amal. It will be in this transitional space in the middle that people will be able to meet."

Troubled History with March 14

¶10. (C) Echoing comments we have heard from other independent Shia, Al-Hajj told us that the independent Shia view current March 14 leaders with great distrust. He praised the 2002 efforts of former President Amine Gemayel, who reached out his hand to form a separate but equal partnership with the independent Shia. "They needed us when the Syrians were still occupying the country. However, when the Syrians

withdrew and March 14 celebrated the Cedar Revolution, they decided that they didn't need us any more. They made a deal with the opposition for the 2005 parliamentary elections. The betrayal and abandonment has left a deep sense of distrust." He also criticized the USG and the international community for focusing all of their attention on March 14 and ignoring the independent Shia for the last three years.

¶11. (C) Al-Hajj is proud of his reputation for integrity. He said he was "brought" to see Saad Hariri by a Quoreitum-Shia interlocutor, Okab Sakr. Hariri offered to put Al-Hajj on a monthly "payroll," but Al-Hajj said he wouldn't take cash in exchange for a photo op only designed to portray Hariri as a friend of the Shia. "This is one of the stupidities of March 14 which has brought us to this current situation."

Two Types of Independent Shia

¶12. (C) Al-Hajj cautioned the Charge to choose carefully among the independent Shia who would approach the USG for assistance. "There are those who only seek to promote their own self-interests and to enhance their own political futures. And there are those who truly believe in an alternative vision for the Lebanese Shia."

¶13. (C) Al-Hajj told us that many "average" Shia have developed a distrust of independent Shia leaders "descended from the important families," such as Ahmed al Assad and Ambassador Khalil Khalil. If forced to pick a side, many will go with the more established and stable party organizations of Amal and Hizballah whose financial resources allow them to offer much needed social services. "Why would you choose the lone guy with only a few million who will pack up and go abroad if times get tough?"

¶14. (C) Interestingly, he was quite critical of Sheikh Ali

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Al-Amine, the Mufti of South Lebanon. Al-Hajj gave a long history of Al-Amine's past ties to Iran, Hizballah and Amal and told us that Al-Amine does not have a strong local following. Al-Hajj does not trust this recent "conversion" to the independent Shia movement.

Moving Forward

¶15. (C) Al-Hajj urged the USG to consider assistance programs which focus on at-risk Shia youth. He said that he would be pleased to bring a range of interlocutors to meet with EmbOffs to discuss assistance initiatives and was pleased by the Charge's emphasis that the Embassy is in "listening mode" to determine the most appropriate track for future partnership activities. Al-Hajj cautioned us that this will require a thoughtful and long-term commitment from the USG.

¶16. (C) Al-Hajj is particularly interested in developing a school to educate a younger generation of moderate Shia sheiks. "They are the ones who will bring light to the darkness." There is also an urgent need for youth programs to provide alternatives to Hizballah recruitment. He also recommends support for a special "union" of moderate Shia sheikhs. "We cannot be effective as members of the opposition-dominated Higher Shia Council." Finally, he told us about a group he has recently helped to form. The Lebanese Moderation Movement has approximately 150 members in the South, the Bekaa Valley, and the Beirut southern suburbs. With young, educated members (most are in their 30's), the group is planning to launch a newspaper entitled "Moderation Echo" to publicly spread their views.

Bio

¶17. (C) Sheikk Mohammad Ali Al-Hajj is 33 years old and was

born in a village near the southern Lebanon city of Tyre. When he was 15 years old, he began to study Shari'a and is currently pursuing a PhD on the subject at the Al-Azhar University. He has been a vocal critic of Hizballah for more than a decade and has authored a number of articles criticizing the Hizballah and Amal leadership. He also publicly criticized the Syrian presence in Lebanon before their departure in 2004 and has gone on record protesting local feudal leadership traditions. Interested in dialogue, Al-Hajj has established cross-confessional relations with a number of Christian churches in the Northern Metn area of Beirut.

Comment

¶18. (C) Al Hajj exhibited courage in coming to the Embassy in the midst of the current violence. He admitted to us that his wife had urged him not to come out of concern for his safety. He told us that Hizballah had been following him and his family members for months, but he wanted to make a point that he would not be intimidated.

¶19. (C) Al Hajj was an impressive interlocutor and is well-respected by other independent Shia figures, such as Lokman Slim. He has a progressive view of social programs and has been instrumental in setting up U.S. Embassy Public Diplomacy-sponsored English-language training program for Shia women. In addition to some frank opinions about previous USG engagement with the independent Shia, he provided us with thoughtful suggestions on how to move forward. End Summary
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